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Heck Oversees Counterterrorism Cases in New Role

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For the majority of her 22-year career with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Brenda Heck was an investigator in New York City where she probed everything from drugs to crimes against children.

Her new job – a Deputy Assistant Director of Counterterrorism Operations – doesn't involve pounding the pavement in the Big Apple, but tackling even bigger targets.

DAD Heck, a December 2009 graduate of the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, took on her role in April, overseeing domestic and international counter-terrorism investigations.

"My mission is to detect, disrupt and deter terrorism," she said by phone. "I'm in charge of the operational direction of our investigations."



At any given time the branch has thousands of investigations open. However, more and more investigations involve receiving a lead that requires the flexibility to devote immediate attention to a breaking matter – no matter when or where the information comes.

"Many of the priority issues we address are driven by intelligence that comes from overseas," she said. "They typically come screaming at us and we run with it."

The job involves overseeing hundreds of agents and analysts, collaborating with other U.S. Intelligence Community and law enforcement partners and interacting with foreign partners overseas.

Also, the job requires teaming with other agencies that are working on counterterrorism cases. A CHDS education has been helpful in helping her to step outside her agency's role and look at the big counterterrorism picture, Heck said.

"I do a lot of collaboration to encourage coordination across the security enterprise," she added.

Fourteen years working the streets of New York honed her skills in interviews, arrests and building a case to take to trial giving her the experience and perspective she needs to manage the FBI's complex counterterrorism mission. Moreover, DAD Heck sites her CHDS education as reinforcing and enhancing those skills.

"It reinforced in me the need to keep asking why," Heck said. "When I got back to my real world, it became clear that some meetings called to address a problem tended to focus on fixing only the symptoms of the problem rather than the true cause. School taught me to keep asking why."

After so many years working in the FBI, study at CHDS helped her break out of what was becoming somewhat insular thinking.

"I no longer think just in terms of the FBI. My focus now is national security," she noted.

Prior to this assignment, DAD Heck was the Section Chief of the division's International Operations Section I (ITOS I) where she directed counter-terrorism investigations within the United States. Her new job encompasses oversight of ITOS I as well as ITOS II, which conducts terrorism investigations overseas.

"Counterterrorism Division runs at a different speed," Heck noted. "There really isn't a day off. It becomes your new 'normal,' you get used to it."

Although the intelligence can come in rapidly, the FBI's counterterrorism collection efforts can make the results more of a long-term rather than immediate prospect as was the case in criminal investigations.

"Intelligence collection can move at a slower pace at times. You're collecting information to build knowledge, not necessarily to build a case," Heck said.

In addition to her investigative role, DAD Heck also routinely treks to Capitol Hill to brief Senate and House oversight committees on priority threats.

"I meet with them often to inform them about our strategy on our top threats," she said.

She also works closely with law enforcement and intelligence agencies from the United Kingdom, Australia, France and Canada.

When interviewed in April, she had just returned from meetings in London.

"We have so much interaction with them; I'm really enjoying the international piece of the job," she said.

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